

Only Droids Serve The Maker

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"Vessel on lunar bypass," crackled the comlink. "This is Kline Security, vessel three-niner. Broadcast your entry permit data."

"Uh-oh," grunted Woyiq. "Bad company."

Daye Azur-Jamin yanked himself upright. His leg braces whirred to adjust. Monor II dominated the viewscreen, opaline atmosphere concealing its five continents.

The Rebel tugship was an aging clunker, and it smelled like old sweat. Daye's team had hoped to slip through the system, camouflaged by dozens of similar craft. "Do we answer?" he asked.

"That or be shot," said Toalar. Rebel gunrunner Una Poot had given Toalar an altered transponder code, but she'd warned him not to put much faith in it... or the entry permit. Toalar clawed the control board.

"Transmitting now." The Gotal spoke in monotones, but he would've passionately defended anyone's freedom. His perceptor cones resembled thick horns. Gray-brown folds crossed his face where humans wore noses.

On a nearby moon, Toalar and Woyiq had just cached 10,000 blaster carbines and two powerful explosives. Monor II was occupied by the Empire. Toalar still had to launch a small pod telling Monor's native sentients, the Sunesis, where to pick up those weapons. Una had ordered him to use a message pod, rather than transmit subspace, to avoid Imperial interception. Their odds of being hailed at all had seemed astronomically small. This was evil luck.

Woyiq rubbed his cheeks with big, hairy hands. "They're taking too long, blast them." Woyiq had competed in Imperial wrestling tournaments. He and Toalar behaved like a life-debt pair, though neither discussed what bonded them. Muscular legs bulged as Woyiq leaned forward.

Envious, Daye gripped his leg braces. Outside his flight suit, stiff metal strips joined alloy rods that pierced his leg bones. The automatons were droid-slaved to an implant low on his spine.

Daye had sabotaged his own armament plant, rather than let the Empire seize control. Toalar had found him half-dead under rubble and spirited him offworld. At remote Silver Station, an Imperial raid had interrupted bacta treatment that'd repaired his hand and almost restored one crushed leg. Rebel medics later braced both legs, and replaced his shattered shoulder; but cranial damage left him 85 percent blind in his right eye, with blurred vision in the left. Restoring full vision would have required surgery that those medics weren't equipped to perform. They implanted a clip in his left cheekbone, enabling him to wear a temporary, high-powered monolens. He was learning to ignore his right eye's misty tunnel vision.

"Maybe we can outrun them." Toalar was already vectoring past the moon, drawing Kline Security away from that weapons cache.

Security responded. "Your code is not locally known. Stand by for boarding."

Daye poised both hands over the armament board.



"Hold fire," said Toalar. "We'll need full engine power." He jabbed a control. "Pod away." Much of the tugship's momentum would transfer to that half-meter alloy pod, speeding it toward Monor's surface. "In five seconds, we'll clear gravity--"

The tugship shuddered. Daye plunged forward against narrow seat restraints.

Toalar hit another panel. "Tractor beam," he droned. Daye plainly felt Toalar's anger, echoed by Woyiq; Una's lessons had accomplished that much. "Hold fire, Daye. That won't help now."

"You over there." The comlink crackled again. "Kill your engines. Prepare for armed boarding. Cooperate or be shot. We don't care which."

"We will cooperate," Toalar answered. He cut the connection. "Daye, you're on deck," he murmured. "Una says Administrator Fuguée detains casual smugglers, asks a few questions, and then sentences them to menial labor. This was always a possibility. We'll eventually get off-planet."

Daye frowned. Toalar, like Una, believed too strongly in Daye's minor Force-sensitivity. Una had survived a husband who'd known a little about using the Force. She'd recruited Daye for his sensitivity, despite his injuries.

But he couldn't manipulate all conversations. "A few questions?" he asked.

Toalar smoothed gray fur over his knobby brows. "Just convince Fuguée we're no threat."

Back on Druckenwell, Daye had been considered a good character-judge. Only Tinian I'att had realized that he could faintly sense others' feelings --

Tinian. He shut his eyes. He'd loved her courage, creativity, and light heart. She'd loved armament work, casual clothes, and uptempo music ... and, amazingly, him. It hurt to remember himself as Tinian had known him, before Moff Eisen Kerioth destroyed their lives. At I'att Armament, she'd been heiress-apparent. He'd been her second under-supervisor, skilled at design and administration. She'd caressed the prematurely gray streak in his left eyebrow and teased: without it, he'd have looked too fresh-faced to command her employees.

No risk of that now. He flexed his aching shoulder. Moff Kerioth had dragged one leg ... but without mechanized help, Daye could only crawl. Furthermore, his monolens gave him all the charm of a speeder with one headlamp.

At least Tinian had escaped whole, thanks to Daye and a Wookiee bodyguard. He had not seen her since then. She must never know he'd survived. He meant to spend himself serving the Rebellion, and then rest ... forever.

There was nothing on board this tugship worth trying to jettison. They could only wait. Monor II, listed on newer Imperial registers as Kline Colony, lay helpless before Imperial planet-rapists. Chemical engineers coveted its cirrifog, a perpetual, glittering haze of crystals so light that they floated in Monor's atmosphere. Daye adjusted his monolens' adjustment ring for maximum distance. The iridescent atmosphere focused.

So did the other ship, growing slowly onscreen. Its long, thin shape, thicker at both ends, resembled an in-system hauler.

He preferred staring at the planet. Monor's native Sunesis had furry, speechless, intelligent juveniles with diffuse nervous systems. At about 15 standard years, they stopped eating and pupated. Some never awoke, but most metamorphosed into hairless adults. Mature mouthparts let them speak Basic. They also used ultra-sound.

Like many sentient species, they had squabbled for centuries. Now their priest-prince, Agapos the Ninth, was inciting them to unite and revolt. Sunesian juveniles needed cirrifog to pupate successfully, and the Empire threatened to take it all. Agapos' writings were so eloquent -- so universally relevant -- that several planetary undergrounds relayed every transmission. On board Una's ship, Daye had accessed several quotes. He particularly liked: "Ye that oppose not only tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! The New Order seeks to hunt down Lady Freedom. Let us receive this bold fugitive. Let us fight boldly alongside her!"

The Empire had responded with a death bounty.

The security ship eclipsed Monor II. Daye's legs whirled as he slumped.

"Don't worry," Toalar murmured. "Administrator Fuguée won't give us much trouble."

* * *

The first man through the airlock wore a trooper's black uniform. "Phew." He pinched his nose. "Look, Lieutenant Karr. Half a stinkin' droid. Where's the other half?"

The next boarder wore the two-color insignia of a naval lieutenant. "So it is," he snorted, lounging against the starboard bulkhead as two more men boarded. "You're going to wish you'd tried smuggling in some other system, boys. Administrator Brago despises your kind."

Brago ... not Fuguée? "We're not smugglers," Daye insisted. Gunrunners was the proper term ...

Toalar added, "We need repairs. We found out too late there's no--"

"Tell Brago." Karr, lean and thirtyish, picked his teeth with a long metal sliver. "You launched a message pod. I say you're smuggling." Una's informer must've guessed right: the Empire was preparing to wipe out the Sunesis. Why else would it send in a tough new administrator? They *must* get those weapons. He must stall this crew until Una's message pod vanished into Monor's atmosphere.

"Take 'em on board," snapped Lieutenant Karr.

Woyiq whooped. He swung his beefy arms in long, powerful arcs. Two troopers flew against bulkheads. They slumped to the deck before a third Imperial stunned Woyiq.

Karr kept picking his teeth. The third trooper, a red-haired boy who looked more scared than fierce, prodded Woyiq with one boot. The big human didn't move ... but he'd bought 15 valuable seconds.

Karr raised a comlink. "Keehon, send another squad. I've got three masses to drag." He scratched his chin with his comlink, eyeing Daye and Toalar. "Care to make it five, boys?"

Daye shifted, balancing. If Toalar twitched a whisker, he'd jump too. The droid legs were phenomenally strong.

Toalar raised his clawed hands, meek for the moment. "Better," observed Karr. "Conor, take them through."

The young trooper twitched his blaster. Daye shuffled through the airlock. Someone seized his arms from behind and snapped on binders. Toalar, too, was grabbed quickly. The young trooper walked them up a short corridor to the patrol craft's bridge. "Sit." He gestured toward a gap between lashed cargo piles along one bulkhead.

At least it smelled better over here. Daye cooperated as slowly as he dared, and the trooper didn't rush him. He cabled Toalar's and Daye's binders to lockdown rings. Another group dragged in Woyiq, wrestled him upright, and secured him. Woyiq's head lolled.

Lieutenant Karr stepped onto the bridge. "Disengage."

With a heavy *ka-chunk*, the Imperial craft loosed Una Poot's tugship. Karr stalked to an overhead viewscreen. "Spot that pod," he barked.

Una's ship plunged into view. Maybe its mass would hide the pod. A dark young man grasped handgrips that protruded from his station. "Sir, permission to fire?"

"Blast away."

White light lashed space. Una's clunker dissolved into wreckage. "Come on," growled the Lieutenant. "Half rations for all of you if nobody spots that pod."

Daye faintly caught the troopers' dislike and distrust.

"I see it!" exclaimed the young red-haired trooper. "Heading six-five by two."

Daye clenched his binders. The dark gunner squeezed his handgrips again. "Target destroyed."

Which target? Daye wondered frantically. Debris or the message pod? The gunner's sense felt just wrong.

"About time," Karr snapped. "This is the slowest crew I've ever had. Set course for Kline Colony."

Karr marched Daye's group down a long gray corridor to a long gray room. Behind the bulkhead-gray desk sat a human with black hair and a short neck.

Lieutenant Karr saluted. "Here they are, Administrator." Through the monolens, still adjusted for long distances, the Administrator's rank patch was a long red and blue blur. "Thank you, Lieutenant," he purred. "At ease." He glared at his prisoners. "What was your cargo?"

Daye stared. This wasn't the scenario they'd rehearsed.

"We didn't get much cooperation with boarding, either." Karr had drawn his toothpick again.

"The pod was destroyed?"

"Affirmative, sir."

Brago laced his fingers and leaned back. "Which of you is the boss?" He dismissed Woyiq, who stood wobbling from the stun bolt, with a scornful glance. "The Gotal, I think? You Rebels always put oddballs in charge. Are you spying for the lumpheads?"

The Sunesis' prominent cranial melon was used for ultrasound. *Lumpheads*. "We're not spies." Daye listened hard. Brago's hostility remained steady.

"Interrogate the Gotal, Lieutenant. We can terminate them all after the feast. Make it festive."

Lieutenant Karr saluted again, then jerked Daye's arm. "Move, droid."

"Droid?" echoed the Administrator.

"It's mostly human above the belt, sir," Karr explained, "but look at these legs."

Brago peered over his desk, then looked up. Daye squinted into unnaturally green eyes. "What happened to you?" Brago asked.

Daye shrugged. "Explosion."

"Saboteur?" Brago cocked an eyebrow.

Daye smiled inwardly. In Agapos' words, "Liberty's flame must be fueled with our blood, mingled with that of the tyrants."

Brago waved a hand. "Lock them up."

As they passed a guarded double-door into a blind corridor, Daye murmured to Karr, "Is Administrator Brago liked?"

"That doesn't concern you."

"He's not well."

"You may be right." Karr laughed. "Stop."

The young, red-haired trooper reached for a black wall panel. A door slid open. Karr shoved Daye through, and it shut with a boom. Still hindered by his binders, he backed up to a wall. He slid down onto the bare, windowless cell's floor.

Now what? Since fleeing Druckenwell, he'd lost track of days. New Year's Fete must be starting. One of several Imperial festivals, it was widely celebrated with heavy eating, drinking, and spicing.

He, Toalar, and Woyiq would be after-dinner entertainment if he didn't think of something. He looked hard at himself, hoping to find steel. He did not want to amuse Brago by begging for mercy.



Within minutes, two other troopers arrived. One had brown hair and a drooping mustache. "Brago wants the droid parts." He pointed a blaster at Daye's braces. "Souvenir."

They whirred as Daye struggled to his feet. Without them, he'd be as helpless as a newborn Talz. "Leave them for now," he pleaded. So much for steel. "Leave me my dignity."

The paunchy blonde trooper lunged. Adrenaline overrode Daye's common sense. Halfway into a lunge kick, he realized he'd overextended. The super-strong droid legs threw him. He crumpled on one side.

The blonde jumped from behind and rolled him onto his stomach. "I thought you'd try that," he grunted. He settled his bulk on Daye's shoulders, his hands on Daye's hip bones. Daye clawed the rough floor. The binders made him doubly helpless, twisting his wrists.

The mustached trooper drew a wicked-looking tool from his hip belt. He knelt on Daye's left ankle and started prying.

Daye gritted his teeth, summoning that steel. *Our blood fuels liberty's flame*, he reminded himself. Through his nerve block, he felt only pressure as the trooper wrenched rods from his bones.

The paunchy blonde leaned hard on his hips, then sprang off. Daye pushed up on both elbows. Sweat slithered down his forehead. The blonde guard stepped away. "Going to give us the glass eye? Or do we take it our way?"

Something whirred in the near distance. Daye's wrists relaxed. Half-hearted, he sat up and slid off the binders. Much help hands would be, if he were blind and lame. He pressed his left cheek, releasing the clip. The duracrete floor and walls became gray blurs.

The trooper snatched his lens and binders, then tossed something aside. His partner stepped down with a sickening crunch. "Karr has decided to send you back to the Maker," he announced. "Wait'll you see what we do with old droids."

They left.

Slowly, Daye stretched his arms. He rubbed his wrists. Then he squinted at his thin, limp legs. Already atrophied, they bled at the joints.

He didn't intend to die without a fight, though his effort might be laughable. Rebels were terminated every day, in pockets of resistance all over the Empire. Daye only wished he'd accomplished more. He wondered what Karr planned.

I'att Armament had sold old droids for parts, but Daye had heard of huge Imperial acid vats and settling tanks, from which composites and metals were reclaimed. If they meant to dump him into one of those, he'd dissolve before he could drown.

Where was Una Poot? Not that he hoped to be rescued, but he wished he could tell her what'd happened. His musical friends, Cheeve and Yccakic, had traveled on with the Rebel medics. Hopefully, Cheeve's wife Twilit would join them at the medics' cushy retirement station. *The ultimate gig.*

Daye was glad he could still smile. He tugged up one shipsuit leg. His ankle had stopped bleeding. He rolled over and started circling the cell, dragging himself with his forearms. He mustn't give up. Some whooping stranger dashed past his door. The feast must be underway. Daye laid his cheek on rough, cold duracrete. When was the last time he'd seen Tinian happy? Young-looking with shoulder-length, red-gold hair, she'd worn the white chest protector and shoulder pauldrons of Imperial stormtrooper armor. Daye and Tinian's grandfather had invented a new



way to dissipate blaster fire. Naive in their trust, Tinian and her grandparents had believed that the Empire would offer a lucrative contract.

Instead, Moff Eisen Keriath executed Tinian's grandparents and seized the plant. Daye and Tinian would have become his slaves if they hadn't escaped. He'd wanted her to build a new life, far from the Empire's leprous grasp.

He'd seen her once more, from a great distance. Silver Station had been drifting apart under Imperial attack. Woyiq had just carried him aboard Una Poot's escape ship, the *Sitting Duck*. A small, saucer-shaped scout had flitted across the *Duck's* viewscreen, and despite a weak particle shield -- and energy shields with peculiar frequency gaps -- that saucer destroyed a TIE fighter before vanishing into hyperspace. Una had claimed Tinian was on board. She'd found another Wookiee protector: *Chenlambec*, Una pronounced, *is no ordinary bounty hunter*.

He rolled onto his back. He'd tried to forget that. His spirited fiancée had joined a bounty hunter instead of finding a place to lie low.

"We are not afraid to follow truth wherever it leads," Agapos had written. "We will even tolerate error, so long as our minds are left free to combat it."

But he feared Tinian had made a grave judgment error.

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Chenlambec thumbed a lock of silver-tipped brown facial fur out of his lightweight breathing mask. Billions of microcrystals floated in every cubic meter of air. One deep, unfiltered breath would've shredded his lungs. By daylight, Monor II dazzled the eyes. Tonight, no star glimmer penetrated.

Tinian adjusted her own mask. Built like a half-grown cub, his new apprentice was ferocious for a human. Chen had also lost most of his family to Imperial attacks, but Tinian was unstable, stunned by grief for her murdered grandparents and chosen life-mate. She'd begun to recover, then relapsed ... repeatedly, for no obvious reason. He suspected nightmares.

"I still don't like it that we didn't pick up any lifeforms," she grumbled. "Are you sure your contact found the right location?"

He crooned softly: this was the place. A sentry must have spotted them.

"We're not even picking up anything underground."

A metal chamber wouldn't show on scanners against a major ore vein. Did she want to wait on board?

"Not me." Over her plain black shipsuit, she straightened her diagonal belt. Two cargo pockets bulged opposite the blaster he'd given her: no l'att, unfortunately, but an inexpensive Merr-Sonn.

Stepping quietly, Chen rounded the *Wrashyr's* pitted hull. Tinian constantly urged him to upgrade his scoutship. She might have been an expert with explosives, but she still didn't understand hunt-trade credit flow.

They groped through warm fog to the cliff's base. "Well," Tinian muttered, "here's a door. But it's magnetically sealed."

Finding this site had taken fast work. Imperial forces jammed all transmissions out of Agapos' defended headquarters, trying to silence the priestly firebrand. But manifestos kept appearing. Chen's Rebel contacts had deduced a secret transmitter. They'd found a remarkably straight ore vein, precisely twice as long as his outsystem transmission frequency, 70 kilometers away. It must be functioning as a mammoth dipole antenna.

"Prennerin." Tinian sniffed. Even through her filter, she must've scented the Sunesis' explosive. "Not the best linear control."

He suggested it may have been all they could afford.

She rolled her eyes. Wisps of red-blond hair dangled over her breath filter's strap.

Chen's source had insisted Agapos would transmit tonight, and Chen had seen no vehicle tracks. Agapos' entourage must be avoiding scanner-visible mechanization.

He rumbled an order. "What, Chen?"

Growling, he corrected her.

"All right," she sighed. "What, *Ng'rhr*?" She copied his inflection well, for a human.

Uncle. He must be her family. She'd never had a clan, not even parents.

He repeated his instruction, then plucked a tiny, silvery cube from between the quarrels on his lizard-hide bandolier. Tinian slid a hand along the wall. "I'm looking," she murmured, "but I don't see a power point."

"Keep looking," chirped the cube.

Chen patted Flirt good-naturedly. Smaller than a restraining bolt, Flirt was a functioning droid. Chen's previous hunt partner had programmed Flirt to seduce an intelligent computer, subvert its security, or change commands. She needed only a nearby power access. Chen returned her to her bandolier perch.

"Guess you'll want me, then." Tinian dug in a cargo pocket. "That depends," piped up Flirt. Chen hushed her.

Seconds later, Tinian sprinted away from the cliff. "Get back," she urged. "Count 10."

Chen crouched behind thick, succulent greenery that gave off a floral scent. Another alien fragrance, biting with a sea-tang, must be the Sunesis, closer to amphibians than mammals.

He told Tinian to recheck her blaster.

She peered down. "Stun," she agreed. Chen hunted by tough rules. It would take skill, luck, and timing to snatch Agapos from his bodyguards without injuring anyone.

Thunder rattled the tropical night. Chen rushed the door. It hung loose on one side. He thrust in his climbing claws and tore it off. They sprinted down a steep, misty tunnel. He hoped he didn't lose Tinian. If she lasted five minutes under fire, she might survive her apprenticeship. He'd have liked to just lob in a gas grenade, but he distrusted Sunesian biology. He couldn't risk killing Agapos.

"I must study war," Agapos had written, "so that my offspring may study economics and astrography. They ought to study economics and astrography, philosophy and agriculture, to give their offspring a right to study painting, poetry, and porcelain." With very little editing, Chen could have quoted that on Kashyyyk.

Tinian waved her small luma at gray-flecked white stone. "Their blast points aren't bad," she conceded, whispering. Another massive door ended the tunnel. "Here, Flirt." She spotted a metal circle near floor level.

"About time," chirped Flirt.

Grunting satisfaction, Chen pressed her prong into the power point. Inside her titanium shell, every non-positronic centimeter bulged with sensor and antenna windings. Her only downfall - besides being jealous -- was inconsistency. Occasionally, simple-seeming tasks took the tiny droid hours to accomplish.

"You're in, boss," she squeaked. "All security systems are down." He asked two more questions.

"Nope," she answered primly. "No other way out. And you've got six people inside."

"Layout?" Tinian asked.

"One room. Transmitter against the left wall. Eight chairs. Don't trip."

Chen passed Flirt to Tinian. Flirt buzzed protest, but if they needed her inside, Tinian -- built lower -- could plug her in quicker. He brandished his blaster and yipped an order.

The door slid open. Cirrifog glittered to life in the corridor. Someone shrieked.

Tinian dropped to the dirt and crawled forward. "Careful!" screeched Flirt. "You'll scratch me!"

Chen counted five. Then he leaped into the center of the doorway and whirled, firing stun bolts at anything turquoise.

The Sunesis brandished primitive weapons. *Avoiding scanners*, he observed calmly. Arrows whizzed. He dodged, spun, kept shooting.

Fire plunged through his bandolier into his chest. "Boss!" shrieked Flirt.

Tinian shrieked, too. She'd lost home, love, and family. If she never cherished anyone or anything again -- not even survival -- the Empire couldn't hurt her.

But without Chen, she'd have no reason to fight on. She dropped Flirt, sprang up, and gripped her miserable Merr-Sonn blaster. Blood gushed from Chen's grizzled chest. A dark green stick protruded from the wound.

Feeling more Wookiee than human, she pumped out stun bolts. The chamber was so small she barely noticed the fog. "Look out!" trilled a voice at one side. "Two of them!"

She glanced at the silver-robed alien. Unarmed. Two turquoise figures sprawled on the dirt. Stunned. But another perched atop a metal chair, brandishing a forearm-length knife. He shifted gangly legs to leap. Chen had rolled away to grope for the blaster he'd dropped.

She fired. The alien fell short. His knife clattered on the stone floor.

A blaster bolt whizzed over her head, no diffuse stun bolt, but focused to kill. Now who -- ?



"Stop!" trilled the voice again. "Leave us in peace!"

She swung her blaster, searching for that final target. The transmitter console, a wall of primitive knobs and dials, stood out a meter from the rock wall.

Chenlambec ripped out the bloody shaft. Its barbed point glistened red. Much to her relief, he roared defiance. Blood streaked his silver-tipped fur.

"Behind the transmitter," Tinian shouted.

Chen roared again. He seized the transmitter bank and rocked it. Tinian stunned the final Sunesis as their protection crashed away. "Now," she panted, turning, "we'll deal with you. "

Agapos stood unflinching. She had to admire his composure. Over round black eyes, silvery crests and bulges set off his turquoise skin like jewelry.

"There's a price on your head," she panted. The breath filter was choking her.

"You have won it."

Chen growled. "Come on," Tinian translated. "Hurry."

"Your partner is injured," trilled the priest-prince.

"Right," Tinian snapped. "The sooner we're back on board our ship, the better." And where on that rustbucket were the medpacs? "You move."

Chen roared agreement.

"I am ready to die," Agapos said calmly, "but I will not be taken." She shoved hair out of her face. "We're not that kind," she insisted, "but we don't have time to chat."

The Sunesi strolled toward Chen. Almost slaving, Chen heaved deep, shaking breaths. The Sunesi extended a four-fingered, turquoise hand and shut his eyes. Chen bared his teeth.

Agapos touched his bleeding chest. Chen rubbed it. Then he cooed.

"You're kidding," she exclaimed. She glared at the Sunesi. "What did you do?"

"My last gift to my executioner," he said steadily, "besides forgiveness. He will carry no scar but the memory of his crime. If I had a weapon, I would shoot you both down. Having none, I can only refuse to cooperate." He raised both long hands over his bulbous head. "Earn your blood money, and murder me. But my words live."

Evidently he'd rather be blasted than go with a raging Wookiee and a half-crazed human girl.

Her trigger finger twitched. "Have it your way." Agapos crumpled. Chen shook his shaggy head as if wrested from rapture. He crooned a question.

"I'm fine," she snapped. "Come on."

Recovering, he pulled a large medjector from his bandolier pouch. He drew 20 mils of Agapos' bright pink blood and squirted the chairs, walls, and transmitter wreckage. After capping the collector, he returned it to his pouch. He hoisted the limp, stunned alien over one shoulder and sprinted toward the shaft.

Tinian scooped up Flirt and followed.

"Dirt!" Flirt screeched. "Don't forget dirt!"

She paused at the tunnel's entry to scrabble a handful of soil mixed with settled cirrifog. If anyone challenged them, they could prove they'd been to Kline Colony.

The *Wroshyr's* landing lights flashed on. Cirrifog danced in their beams.

Daye would have called it exquisite. He'd had a keen eye for beauty. It'd overjoyed her when he called her lovely. His long, strong hands had held her so gently ...

She would never stop grieving him. Never. Never. Chen's roar drifted out the hatch.

"Coming!" Blinded by tears, she groped toward the light. "I'm coming, Ng'rrh!"

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Daye eyed a mottled gray blotch on the floor. This duracrete had cured so poorly that even without his monolens he had no trouble seeing it -- but he hadn't been able to pound through. An anemic lumipanel lit the air filter. He couldn't reach either of them. Administrator Brago hadn't announced the impounding of Una Poot's weapons. Maybe the Sunesis still stood a fighting chance. Maybe Brago was just busy eating.

"There is something odious in government from off planet," Daye remembered from Agapos' essays. "We demand leaders of our own kind, whose juveniles pupate alongside our own. Only they will consider our future." With a little minor editing, he could have rebroadcast that on Druckenwell.

He wished he might have met one of the Sunesis. He'd heard that metamorphosis predisposed them to believe in life after death. He wished he believed it now. He'd be glad for a rest, but here, he'd realized that he dreaded extinction.

Footsteps stopped outside his door. He braced himself against the wall.

Two lanky, turquoise-skinned people burst in, carrying blurs that resembled blasters. A silver shape followed, roughly humanoid, obviously mechanical. Finally appeared the young, red-haired trooper. Daye's apprehension metamorphosed into hope. In the Force, this youngster felt brave -- determined -- and helpful. "Conor?" It couldn't be ...

"My name is Urek. We've got to get you out of here."

He recognized the name: Una Poot's Rebel contact, who'd infiltrated during Fuguée's tenure! He'd been the one who "spotted" their message pod, too.

"Come on," the youth urged. "The men I stunned won't stay down forever."

"Can't use my legs," Daye warned him. "Hardly at all."

Urek glanced through the open cell door. "Carry him, Aiteff." The droid rolled closer on narrow treads. Urek and one Sunesi lifted Daye. The droid bent his arms to a chairlike angle. "Try to be comfortable," Aiteff intoned, "but secure. We must hurry."

Daye sat sideways and wrapped both arms around Aiteff's shoulders. "I'm on," he urged. "Go."

The long-limbed Sunesis highstepped out. Aiteff followed. In the corridor waited another group: several more turquoise blurs, two metallic droid-shapes, three humans -- one with a burly wrestler's build -- and a Gotal.

"Hurry." One Sunesi beckoned with a gray-clad arm. Daye squinted so hard it made his head ache. This one had delicate brow crests and was probably female. "In courage is strength!" she hissed.

"Praise the Maker," responded Daye's droid -- and his biological companions. Aiteff rolled forward. The others sprinted.

But only droids served the Maker ... or so Daye had believed. He'd heard that Agapos' people let droids and humans live among them as equals. Had they also adopted the droids' quasi-deity?

"I usually carry Daye," Woyiq offered.

"No time," Urek puffed. "Keep running. Got to get back to my post. Sorry about stunning you. Shipboard. Self-defense!"

"No harm," Woyiq grunted.

The group turned right, away from Brago's office. Daye watched behind. They took another right turn. Black blurs appeared from a side passage. "Troopers!" he cried.

"Go!" exclaimed the small Sunesi. Most of the group pelted on. She and two droids fell behind, drawing weapons. Woyiq lingered with them. Daye clung to his droid. His helplessness humiliated him.

Aiteff plunged into a lift shaft. They rode up several levels, then dashed along another corridor. "Where is everybody?" Daye asked.

"They were eating." The droid sounded smug, having no such need. "Administrator Brago promised a feast. Urek knew it was our chance."

The lead runners reached a door. Stunned troopers lay scattered around it. "Trade entry." Aiteff maneuvered between uniformed bodies. "Hold your breath!"

They plunged through. Daye went totally blind in a dense gray fog. Feathery crystals caressed his cheeks and hands as the droid rolled ahead. He heard -- or was he imagining? -- high-pitched squeals in all directions. Ultrasound would be helpful in murky air.

Aiteff clanged through a hatch Daye hadn't seen coming and dropped him on a seat, then extended a blocky arm and snatched a pair of nostril filters off a bulkhead. Daye jammed them in, then squinted at another dark shape. Toalar stood beside a hatch, brandishing an alien-design blaster. This small shuttle had four seating rows. He hoped it had shields.

One Sunesi guarded the airlock with Toalar. "Nee's coming," the alien shrilled.

"The small one?" Daye asked.

The Sunesi nodded. He wiped his bulging forehead.

"Is she your leader?"

The Sunesi nodded again. "One of Agapos' close disciples. A light in our darkness. We will not leave her to the enemy."

Another Sunesi clenched the transport's controls. "He will not abandon thee, but will guide thee and strengthen."

"Through the thickest of nights," three others whispered.

Daye was glad the Sunesis spoke Basic. Evidently he wasn't going to die, after all ... not yet. "Toalar, are you all right?" Brago had ordered Toalar interrogated.

The Gotal shrugged. "Nothing I haven't been through before. He's no--"

Two droids barreled on board; then Woyiq, carrying the small, slender Nee. "Medpac," he rasped. "They got her."

Nee's left arm hung limp. Pink fluid dripped from her four long fingers. She slapped an airlock panel with her uninjured hand, trilling loudly.

The transport lurched. Nee's huge eyes closed, and her thin silver lips moved. Another Sunesi struggled toward her against acceleration.

She bled from her upper arm, near her shoulder. What kind of weapons were the Imperials using on these people? Daye flushed, wishing he could ease her pain. He knew what it meant to be injured.

"Got a medpac?" growled Woyiq.

"Hush." A Sunesi slipped him two nostril filters.

Nee was singing. "*Viumbay, viotay. Sifu.*" A long pause, then she sang again.

Distraction technique, Daye guessed. It might be a long flight to her medic. Her companion laid a hand on her arm. "*Sifu,*" she sang. "*Sifu.*"

"Toalar," Woyiq exclaimed. "Got a medpac?"

"Wait!" Daye squinted harder. Beneath Nee's scorched sleeve, turquoise skin was knitting before his eyes. Blood stopped dripping. What were they doing?

"Praise this making," Nee's compatriot intoned in Basic.

Nee raised her head. "Glory greater than the stars," she sang. "Ye are never forsaken."

Woyiq gaped. Daye stretched out through the Force. Nee's presence pulsed powerfully. She'd just healed herself ... and come through refreshed, not weakened.

"Put me down," she directed.

"Whatever you say, lady." Woyiq obeyed.

Nee staggered toward the pilot's console. The shuttle bucked. Daye guessed they were dodging fire. If Sunesis used ultrasound for everyday communication, their radar must be exceptional.

And they *healed* themselves. He stared at Nee's bulbous head. This disciple did, anyway. Daye clenched his legs. Could he do the same.... using the Force?

Jedi had, he knew from whispered folklore. Nee was obviously strong in the Force.

Was he?

He couldn't even imagine restoring his atrophied legs. But one medic had said his good eye might refocus in time, even if he did not reach a surgical droid. The worst damage had affected nerves deep in his skull.

He closed both eyes. He tried grasping the Force and bringing it to bear on the throbbing ache behind his temples.

Nothing happened.

Nee's song hung in his mind. Maybe the Sunesis' local deity, or spirit, or healing field might take pity on an injured human. "*Viumbay,*" he sang silently, "*viotay. Sifu.*" The transport jolted. He grabbed his narrow armrests and opened his eyes.

Between his seat and the pilot's, tiny crystals swirled and glittered.

He blinked. He squinted. Neither made any difference. Both of his eyes had focused -- he was seeing three dimensions!

Toalar moaned and rubbed his perceptor cones. "What is it?" Daye asked, only half-believing.

"Headache," answered Toalar. "But it's fading."

Gotals felt the Force through those cones. Daye leaned back. What had he done? Or had he? Was there an outside power here, as his grateful instinct suggested? Could he ... could it ... heal his legs?

He shut his eyes and repeated the song, stroking them. Nothing. Why be greedy? He could see! If only he sat closer to a viewport. The little craft seemed to be leveling out. They were probably headed for another continent.

He was going to meet Agapos. Nee's spiritual leader. Possibly a greater healer.

Something touched his shoulder from behind. He looked up into Nee's delicate turquoise face. Her silvery brow crests and small, round ears glistened. "He touched you," she murmured, her voice a sopranino trill. "*Sifumungu*."

"Who?" Daye whispered. "Who is it?"

She laughed softly, a trill of shared joy, not derision. She raised her hand from his shoulder and touched his forehead. Suddenly exhausted, he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * *

The shuttle had stopped. Daye's bloody pantlegs had crusted to his joints. Nee stood in front of him, haloed by cabin lights in the cirrifog. A sense of terrible shock slapped him awake. "What's wrong?" he asked.

She swung a long arm. "Come. Aiteff will carry you."

The flat-chested droid rolled into position. Nee scurried to the hatch and vanished through, leaving Daye alone with Aiteff. He pulled up into the droid's metal arms. "What happened?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

"Distress call," Aiteff answered. "Agapos was due to transmit today. Someone else found his transmission site."

Hairs prickled at the base of Daye's neck. "Imperial?"

"We hope not." Aiteff set off. "His escorts were virtually unarmed."

"Why?"

"To avoid detection. He says his defense is the Maker." Agapos ... missing. With a price on his head.

Aiteff wheeled up a long, curving corridor, its ceiling obscured by sparkling haze. Immediately he doglegged into a room jammed with droids, humans, and gangly Sunesis. Console lights flickered, creating half-spheres of shimmering, colored air.

Aiteff rolled to a large viewing well. A humanoid protocol droid stood beside it, close to Toalar and Woyiq. "Aiteff," greeted the droid. "Daye, I am Bee-Kay-Four, Agapos' second in command. Thank you all for the weapons you brought, but we cannot recover them yet. Our search team just reached Agapos' bunker. His aides are rousing from stun. Agapos' blood is everywhere." Outraged, Daye clenched his fists. "We did not track an incoming ship," continued Bee-Kay-Four. "Without Agapos to bless our battles, we cannot survive."

Under other circumstances, Daye might have distrusted an unrestrained droid. This one seemed to have taken charge without anyone objecting.

"There's one outgoing." Toalar pointed vehemently at the viewing well.

A round red bogey streaked outsystem. Four gold darts followed. From the other side of Monor II, eight more ships rose in pursuit. "That must be the bounty killers," agreed Bee-Kay-Four. "We've hailed. They do not respond."

Daye pointed at the darts. "Those are yours?"

"And the others are Brago's." Nee fingered her scorched sleeve. The intensity of her grief made Daye wish Una had not coached him.

The silvery droid swiveled. "Magnify target zone."

Bogey and darts filled the well. Daye no longer needed to squint. The darts were closing.

Bee-Kay-Four's fingers pinged against his sides. "If we don't take them, Brago should."

"Vengeance belongs to the Maker," Nee objected.

The droid answered, "We need not let murderers escape."

"Get 'em," muttered Woyiq.

Daye glared at the bogey. Abruptly he saw its distinct saucer-shape. His throat constricted. "What reading do you get on that ship's shields?"

Another droid touched the well's interface point, then answered, "Marginal. Particle shielding is only 37 percent of standard, and the energy shields have frequency gaps. This will not be difficult." Tinian! But why here?

Because of the death bounty! *Chenlambec was no ordinary bounty hunter*. Una had refused to explain further. The little saucer wasn't even trying to shoot back. "Hold fire!" he cried. "That's a Rebel agent! How many lifeforms on board?"

"I beg your pardon?" Bee-Kay-Four's head swiveled.

"Lifeforms," snapped Daye. "How many? That bounty hunter may have faked Agapos' death, to save him from the Empire!" Blue firing-range wedges appeared in front of the Sunesian darts.

Bee-Kay-Four touched in. "Three lifeforms. What gives you this odd idea?"

Chenlambec ... Tinian ... and another. Una's friend hadn't slaughtered Agapos! "Your leader's on that ship," Daye insisted.

Every Sunesi, every droid, every human in the room froze and stared at him. Their shock pounded him.

"But the Empire posted a death bounty." Bee-Kay-Four swept out silvery arms.

"So they faked his death." Was Toalar picking up his panicky thoughts? *Inadequate shields!* "Can you risk killing Agapos if he's on board?"

"No!" trilled Nee. "Beekay, change orders!"

Bee-Kay-Four cocked his metal head, maddeningly calm. "If those are Rebel agents, why didn't you tell--"

"I just recognized their specs!"

One blue firing-range wedge nearly brushed the unshielded saucer. "Hold fire," Daye pleaded. "We'll chase them down. Give us a ship."

"That's our entire defense force," Nee trilled.

"Recall one, then," said Daye, "but let us pursue. If those Imperials reach Agapos, he will be slaughtered."

Bee-Kay-Four touched the interface. "Reprogram orders," he intoned. "Disable but do not destroy. Then stand by to escort a weapons retrieval."

One blue wedge flashed red. Daye swallowed panic. Had Bee-Kay-Four changed his orders too late?

The blue wedges winked out. The red saucer continued to flee. Bee-Kay-Four held the interface. "Minor damage," he observed. "They are slowed but not crippled. Aiteff, take these people to my personal shuttle." His head rotated toward Toalar. "I arrived on Monor as booty, stolen from a cruel master. Serving Agapos is freedom enough. You must bring him back."

Daye worried: How badly was Chenlambec's ship damaged? Would they need rescue? "We'll try," he promised. *Let's go, let's go!*

"But if you are mistaken," continued the droid, "if Agapos is dead, then those bounty hunters must not live to collect their reward. Rebel agents or not."

"We swear," Toalar declared, "but consider this. Agapos might want to stay in hiding."

"Hoil!" Beekay turned aside. "Help them. Report back."

A Sunesi near a door hatch rippled off a salute. His skin was greener than the others', his brow crests wider. "Follow me," he exclaimed.

Finally! Woyiq reached toward Daye, but Aiteff was already swiveling. Grinding his treads, he chased Hoil and Toalar out the dome's outer walkway, then up a spiralling ramp. Woyiq hustled alongside. The three-finned shuttle on deck had distinctly Imperial lines. "Pretty," Woyiq grumbled. "But is it fast?"

"Our fastest." Aiteff deposited Daye in a second-row seat, then retreated. "Go with the Maker!"

Daye passed a hand over his eyes. There'd been no pain, no gradual improvement. Just instantaneous healing. "We will," he answered. "Thank you." Whatever the Sunesis believed in -- healing, or life after death -- he wanted to know more. If they didn't intercept Agapos, he'd return.

The hatch shut. Woyiq plunked down in back beside Daye. Grasping the controls with clawed hands, Toalar launched.

What if it wasn't Tinian? Daye peered over Hoil's shoulder. The main sensor glowed green. "Radar?" he asked, remembering his guess.

"Beekay refitted this ship." Hoil stroked the console. "Ours have shorter range than most scanners, but we can calibrate jump acceleration."

"What do you mean?" Toalar's monotone throbbed.

Hoil's bony fingers danced on the panel. "We'll read their momentum as they jump. That'll give us a good guess as to its length." Was it Tinian? Daye tried relaxing into the Force. On impulse, he begged, *Please ... whoever you are ... show me if --*

Her presence pierced his mind like a dart. Then the saucer-blip vanished.

The damage wasn't too bad, then. They'd jumped. But it was Tinian, up there! ... and Agapos. Maybe Agapos could heal his legs. But how would Tinian react if she saw him this way?

Daye glanced at the aft screen. Beekay's ship was easily outrunning the Imperial squadron. This must be a Core Worlds shuttle. Who had owned Beekay?

"Clear of the gravity well," Toalar announced. "Are we programmed?"

Hoil jabbed a key. "There."

"Hang on!" Toalar ordered. Stars turned to brilliant threads.

* * *

"Tell me, hired killers: Have you made peace?"

Tinian whirled her flight chair. Agapos stood framed by the aft bulkhead's pitted retractable hatch. Chen had dumped him on a bunk, still stunned, and locked the aft cabin; the *Wroshyr* had two tiny cells hunters called "meat lockers," but Chen refused to confine Agapos there.

"What do you mean?" she cried. She couldn't stun him; she'd shelved her blaster. "Flirt, did you let him out?"

"No!" hiccupped Flirt, installed on the main console. "He used sonics!"

Chen's head popped through the deck hatch. He'd patched a deadly pinpoint breach, but now he had to restart life-support. Onboard oxygen would take them only halfway to Tekra Point. Already the air tasted rusty.

"Make peace with the one who made you." Agapos folded his fingers over his silvery tunic. "We will shortly die."

Chen roared. "You're right," Tinian translated hastily. "Agapos, if he doesn't fix the scrubbers we're all dead."

"I disapprove of killing," Agapos assured her. "But I have sworn eternal hostility against every form of tyranny. I will not be used for foul Imperial purposes. I would --"

"Shut up!" she cried. "We're not Imperials! We're trying to save your wretched life."

Agapos glanced toward Chen, then back. "You speak truth," he declared. "I feel it on the Force. But how can this be? At my bunker, you acted savagely."

"We were scared," Tinian snapped. Agapos felt the Force, like Daye? *Oh, Daye ...*

Chen corrected her, then ducked back down.

"I was scared," she admitted. "He was wounded. Chen has an Imperial bounty license, but if the Empire finds out what he does with it, his life will be worth twice yours."

Agapos tilted his bulbous head. "Why is that?"

Tinian explained rapidly. "I see," said the Sunesi when she had finished. "Then I am in your debt. But my followers will grieve deeply."

"They'll avenge your death against the Empire," Tinian pointed out.

"I hope not," said Agapos. "Vengeance belongs to the Maker. Only liberty is worth bloodshed. I am not liberty."

Tinian frowned. Once, she'd believed in a larger cause. She'd been ready to run I'att Armament for the Empire. It was vengeance she served now, not the Rebellion. "But they'll be good and mad," she argued. "They'll fight on without you."

Chen roared a suggestion.

"Right," she said. "They'll be safer without you. Look, we're in trouble... if you don't mind."

The tall alien dropped onto the deck and peered down the hatch. "What is your need?"

Chen spouted technical jargon. Tinian crouched and tried to translate. "You're going to suffocate," piped up Flirt. "That's the long and the short of it. Then what happens to me?"

"We've got less than an hour of air left," Tinian sniffed. *Maybe less.* "We lost a lot."

Agapos raised up on long arms. He looked like a long-legged, tailless turquoise newt. "You have oxywater tanks."

Tinian bristled. How had he known *that*? Inside the largest compartment, Chen's small cloning cylinder wasn't a genuine Spaarti, but the homebrew apparatus gave good, fast-and-dirty results. Chen had squeezed the last drops of Agapos' blood out of his medjector into its production chamber. It would create enough differentiated tissue to convince pay agents that Chenlambec, known in hunt circles as "the Raging Wookiee," had once again brought in all that was left of the corpse.

Maybe Agapos could smell oxywater, the way she smelled explosives. "Yes," she said, "but we need that tissue."

Agapos drew in his long legs and unfolded himself upright. "We need oxygen first. I can cavitate dissolved oxygen from oxywater."

Tinian had supervised cavitation at I'att Armament: high-energy ultrasound could energize dissolved gases out of a liquid. "Chen!" She bent down. "Did you hear that?"



He wurfled and kept working.

An alarm klaxon shrilled. "Twenty seconds!" she cried.

Chen leaped through the hatch, silvertip fur flying. He swung into the pilot's seat as easily as if he were climbing a tree.

"Get secure," Tinian ordered Agapos. "We're about to drop out of hyperspace. Just for a minute. This is an intermediate jump."



"To put off pursuit?" Agapos scrambled aft. He moved well for a mystic.

Tinian left the hatch open. "Exactly. But we can't jump three times. Not if we want to get to Tekra Point breathing." Tekra Point was an aging colony ship, stolen from the Empire and refitted with one Rebel's family treasure. Chen often dropped "acquisitions" here, close to a populated world. So he claimed. She hadn't seen it yet.

Her seat lurched. The starlines shrank to points. Chen bent over the nav computer.

* * *

Toalar strained, listening through his perceptor cones for any faint buzz of the Force. The elegant Imperial shuttle's onboard relays almost deafened him. Hoil gripped the throttles, preparing to drop back into realspace. Agapos' presence had lingered in the Sunesian control room. Here, Toalar hoped he might sense -- Pain! "They're here!" he exclaimed. "Track them again!"

* * *

Most of an hour later, Tinian stood at Agapos' shoulder, Chen beside the pilot's station. They'd all donned oxygen masks and pony bottles. Chen's bottle indicator already

glowed red.

It'd been close -- scary close -- when they dropped out of hyperspace to find an Imperial ship right on their tail. Chen had rushed his second jump. They might miss Tekra Point by light-years.

Flirt had isolated the oxywater tanks. Chen had strained tissue into a sample jar, then turned over the tanks to Agapos.

"Protect your ears." Agapos upended a collection bottle and snapped down connectors.

Tinian backed to the opposite bulkhead and smashed both hands against the sides of her head.

Then Agapos screamed. Ultrasonic vibrations echoed off elliptical bulkheads. Her body vibrated. Her cheeks flushed. She felt woozy. Chen keened.

Agapos drew a deep breath. "Are you all right?"

So that was how he'd have killed them. Chen howled. "I'm fine," she retorted. "Are you?"

"Is it working?" chirped Flirt.

Agapos flicked the collection bottle. "From this much oxywater, I can get you there. Yes. Another gift. This one, of appreciation." "If we're on course," Tinian muttered bitterly. "Go ahead."

Agapos opened his mouth as if to address her again, then shook his head and turned away.

Tinian braced herself.

* * *

Chen was easing the *Wroshyr* into a docking cradle when another ship appeared on its sensors. "Him again!" Tinian cried around her oxygen mask.

Chen growl-barked.

"Get ready to run," she warned Agapos. He'd kept her talking while the collection bottles emptied again, shielding her from boredom and fear. He understood sorrow; his bondmate had also died. He'd sympathized with her recurring dream of frantically running, dodging blaster fire, never daring to look back. And he'd left her something to chew on: "Love and loyalty must both be sustained by sacrifice. Until we can learn to return good for evil, there will be no tranquility."

Impractical, but it ennobled her memory of Daye. She would've liked to embrace Agapos, but her hands were full of maneuvering throttles. She was still learning to fly this rustbucket.

"They will refit you?" Agapos asked.

"They're standing by." Chen had explained his need, and the rush. The side hatch clanged. Tinian released the lock. "Good-bye," she called over her shoulder. "Good luck."

"I thank you--"

The hatch popped. Agapos jumped offship. Three humans leaped on. Chen barked.

"Underdeck," Tinian translated. "Hurry."

* * *

Stationers jammed Tekra Point's lounge corridor, some unwashed and unkempt and others in uniform, all trying to get into the lounge. Toalar sighed. "No use," he droned. "We'll have to come back."

"No, we won't," muttered Woyiq. "If I have to hike up a level and rip out the deck, we'll see Agapos."

"Follow me." Hoil plunged into the crowd.

Daye clung to Woyiq's shoulders. His legs dangled over Woyiq's arms. Grumbling stationers backed off when they saw that Hoil was Sunesian. Daye swallowed his pride and hung on.

They reached an open area designed to accommodate 20 or 30. Daye guessed this crowd at 50 or more. On one of several loungers near a bulkhead sat another Sunesi. Through the Force, Daye felt his presence like a damped energy furnace.

Agapos spotted Hoil. "Friend," he trilled, and then, "Let these people through."

Hoil stalked across a sea of cross-legged stationers. Behind Woyiq, Toalar was probably coming.

Daye saw only Agapos. The priest-prince's presence prickled like bacta. Agapos' long, silvery-gray, sleeved tunic draped in long folds over the faded brown lounger. His brow crests stood out strongly, more like Hoil's than Nee's. "Who are these people?" he asked.

Hoil touched one knee to the deck. "Rebels and friends," he answered. "Beekay's ships would have destroyed you."

"Understandable mistake." Agapos extended his palms. "The Tekrans supplied my ... abductors with replacement parts. They remained docked for less than a minute."

"I know," murmured Daye. He'd been relieved and heartsick, a crazy-making pair of emotions.

"You were the ones who followed us?" Agapos asked.

"Yes. This one --" Hoil pointed up at Daye. "-- realized you were shipboard. He seems to know the hunters who abducted you."

Agapos eyed Daye. "Your name, brother-son? No, wait. You are uncomfortable." He flicked his tunic folds closer and beckoned to Woyiq. "Seat him beside me."

Woyiq let Daye slip out of his arms. Daye could scarcely believe this was happening. He had met Agapos. He was sitting beside Agapos.

"Now," said the priest-prince. "Your name?"

"Daye Azur-Jamin."

Agapos stared. Tinian had undoubtedly told the priest-prince he was dead. What else had she said?

Agapos rocked onto his feet and raised his arms. "Friends and brothers," he called, "thanks for your welcome. I must speak with these persons. May we continue our fellowship later?"

The crowd dispersed quietly, as if Agapos inspired politeness. The seedy lounge emptied except for Agapos, Hoil -- seated at the priest-prince's left hand -- Woyiq, cross-legged at his feet, and Toalar ... who stood several paces away, pressing one hand to his head as if it ached miserably.

Agapos laid a hand on Daye's shoulder. "She is sick with grief," he murmured. "Why have you deceived her?"

Guilt jabbed Daye. "So I could give myself to the Rebellion. It was better, sir -- to let her think I had died -- than to let her see me like this." He splayed both hands on his legs.

"You too are grieving, for the loss of your old life. She would care for you as you are."

"Yes," Daye began, "but--"

"You made a great sacrifice, brother-son. But you are too proud of it."

Daye blinked. Proud? "The Imperials did kill her grandparents."

"Yes. Poor child. And what of her parents?"

"She never knew them." From a fellow employee, Daye had learned only that Tinian's mother abandoned her before vanishing. "You say she is ill?"

"She is trying to kill her capacity to love. She may succeed." Daye stared at his hands. It might've been better to have died than to hear this. "It is not all your doing," said Agapos. "She chooses this. Chenlambec tries to dissuade her."

Daye had tried to imagine that unconventional bounty hunter. "What is he like?"

"Courageous. Intelligent. She does not realize how deeply he cares for her."

Daye covered his eyes. He ached all over, especially his heart.

"How were you were injured?" Agapos asked quietly.

Telling his story gave Daye no pleasure.

"You made certain you would harm no one else," Agapos observed.

Daye nodded, warmed against his will by Agapos' presence. "I tried. I didn't try to save myself."

"Are you still in pain?"

"Always," he admitted. His legs were nerve-blocked, but the shoulder throbbed almost constantly.

"Pain is easy to control with the Force. You are already doing it ... somewhat."

Daye laid his hand over Agapos. "I believe you can help me. Your disciple, Nee, showed me how to heal my sight."

Agapos turned to the others. "Excuse us for a moment. You, particularly," he addressed Toalar. "We have not spoken, but I know you helped move events. Thank you."

"Pleasure is mine," grunted Toalar.

"I will not be offended if you leave," Agapos assured him. "We will speak over the comlink. I hold you in highest regard, but my presence pains Gotals."

Toalar's red eyes brightened. "Thank you," he exclaimed. He galloped out.

"Now." Agapos turned back to Daye. "You can do much yourself, using the Force. Try..."

Ten minutes later, Daye sat straighter. As Agapos claimed, pain control was not difficult. He'd needed only to be taught.

"Join the Sunesi way," Agapos said gently. "You could eventually heal yourself."

"Eventually?" Daye's spirit sank again.

"Your eyes were healed by the Maker," insisted Agapos. "To show you it could be done. *Sifu mungu*," he sang, smiling.

It had to be true. He'd expended no effort. "Yes," said Daye.

"Your spirit needs healing, too. There is much good in you, but your pride and your pain make you a lesser man. Give your life to service, and you will save it."

Daye hesitated. Was this destiny, or a heartwarming temptation? "I would be pleased to teach you. The greatest gift is serving individuals, not --" He opened his hands to the empty room. "-- transmitting to the teeming galaxy."

"Tinian and Chenlambec save one life at a time," Daye agreed. "Agapos, please stay in hiding. For the sake of your safety ... and theirs. Chenlambec and Tinian risk their lives to save others." He should have known she wouldn't make a judgment error!

"My people will grieve," Agapos objected.

"Send Hoil back." Daye glanced past Agapos at the other Sunesi. "He can relay the secret."

"Deception is never wise," Agapos answered. "I myself might have killed your dearest friends."

Hoil raised a hand. "Master, the stationers have kept this place secret."

"True."

"When we must protect information from Imperial intelligence, it can be done."

The priest-prince folded his hands. "Very well. I shall remain in hiding. I shall take another name. But I shall double my writing speed."

"Wonderful," murmured Hoil.

"I will have nothing to distract me. I will have no followers to nurture. Unless this brother-son will help me?" He raised a brow crest at Daye.

Agapos would need a new identity, and a technologically knowledgeable aide to help transmit his essays. Daye wanted to agree; he felt deeply honored; but how much of this longing was a selfish desire to be whole, one day ... and reveal himself, healed, to Tinian?



"Good," said Agapos softly. "That sense is humility. The Tekrans tell me they maintain a safeworld. There we could disseminate my writings. And I hear they build arms for the Rebellion." Agapos crinkled his silvery lips. "I'm told you were a skilled researcher."

Tinian had smuggled two of his c-boards off Druckenwell, hoping someone might redevelop I'att Armament's anti-energy field. Some day. She'd left them with Una Poot ... and Toalar would shortly report back. Suddenly he saw his future. "Take me as your aide, then," he said, "or your acolyte."

Agapos inclined his head. "In time, perhaps, my disciple. But count the cost. Some day, I will ask a difficult penance."

Daye raised an eyebrow.

"We must seek out your Tinian, brother-son."

* * *

Chen scrambled up the deck hatch.

"All patched in?" Tinian still quivered, but Agapos' screams hadn't injured her permanently. Already the *Wroshyr* -- the Wrusty, it ought to be called -- smelled better. Chen tossed his head and howled.

"Good as new," echoed Flirt. Tinian had polished her until she shone ... and made a new friend. "Better, in some places. Did you see that second mechanic? What a hunk --"

Tinian had no patience with hunks. "Fine," she interrupted. "Next stop, Ookbat. Payday. Is this the best bounty you ever took?" Chen tucked his dark chin to his silvery chest and chuckled. "Right," she sighed. He was infuriatingly generous. "Most of it goes to Una Poot. But may I make a request?"

Chen woofed and laid his hand on her arm.

"No, *Ng'rrh*." Fondly, she tugged his soft fur. "Not that. I don't need pretty things. But the *Wroshyr* could use better shielding." Howled laughter rattled its pitted bulkheads.

"That's funny?" Flirt squeaked. "Boss, you owe her an I'att blaster at least! She saved your life again. Remember Agapos' transmitter room."

Tinian glared. "Flirt! Never say that to a Wookiee!" Chen crooned a soft reproach.

"Well." Tinian shrugged. "Okay. If it makes you want to upgrade!"

Author's note: Most of Agapos' "sayings" are based on the words of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine, who fanned a revolution not-so-long ago in this galaxy. As Jefferson wrote, "I hold it, that a little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical."